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ABSTRACT

Until recently fathers were the hidden parents in research on children's well-being. Research stimulated by the new interest in fathers suggests that fathers' involvement in their children's schools does make a difference in their children's education. This issue brief looks at the extent to which fathers are involved in their kindergartners' through 12th graders' schools, using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES). Findings noted include the following: (1) fathers in two-parent families are less likely than mothers in two-parent families to be highly involved in their children's schools; (2) fathers and mothers who head single-parent families are virtually identical in their level of involvement, and it is quite similar to that of mothers in two-parent families; (3) fathers in two-parent families are more likely to attend school or class events or general school meetings than they are to attend parent-teacher conferences or to volunteer at their children's schools. The issue brief concludes by noting that the observed patterns of fathers' involvement are consistent with existing research and with the notion of a division of labor in two-parent families. The low participation of fathers in two-parent families offers schools an opportunity to increase overall parental involvement by targeting fathers. (HTH)

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ISSUE BRIEF

April 1998

How Involved Are Fathers in Their Children's Schools?

Fathers in two-parent families are less likely than mothers in two-parent families to be highly involved in their children's schools. Indeed, many fathers in two-parent families are relatively uninvolved in their children's schools.

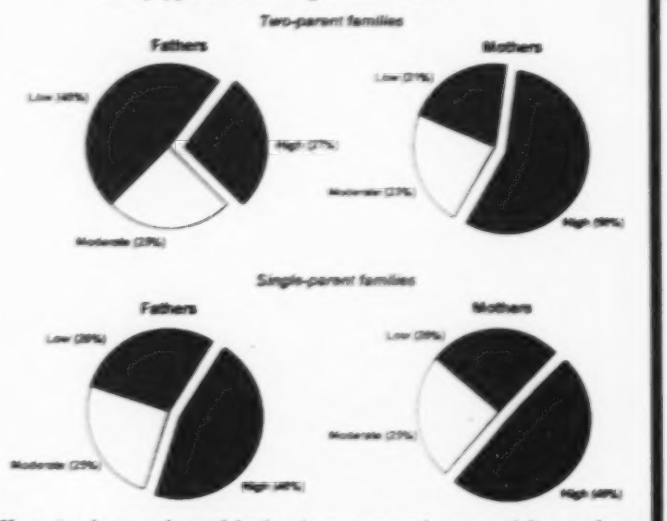
Until recently, fathers were the hidden parent in research on children's well-being. Their importance to children's financial well-being was widely accepted, but their contribution to other aspects of children's development was often assumed to be secondary to that of mothers and was not usually examined. Reflecting this bias in research on child development, many federal agencies, and programs dealing with family issues focused almost exclusively on mothers and their children. In 1995, President Clinton issued a memorandum requesting that all executive departments and agencies make a concerted effort to include fathers in their programs, policies, and research programs where appropriate and feasible (Clinton, 1995). This new attention devoted to fathers is not intended to lessen the focus on the important role that mothers play in their children's lives, but rather to highlight the fact that fathers are important too.

Research stimulated by the new interest in fathers suggests that fathers' involvement in their children's schools does make a difference in their children's education (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). This issue brief looks at the extent to which fathers are involved in their kindergartners' through 12th graders' schools using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES:96), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The involvement of fathers in two-parent and in father-only families is presented and contrasted with that of mothers in two-parent and in mother-only families.[1]

The NHES:96 asked about four types of school activities that parents could participate in during the school year: attending a general school meeting, attending a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attending a school or class event, and serving as a volunteer at the school. Parents are said to have low involvement in their children's schools if they have done none or only one of the four activities during the current school year. They are categorized as having moderate involvement if they have done two of the activities. Those who have participated in three or four of the activities are said to be highly involved in their children's schools.[2]

The proportion of children living in two-parent families with highly involved fathers is about half of the proportion with highly involved mothers, 27 percent and 56 percent, respectively (figure 1). Nearly half of children in two-parent families have fathers who participated in none or only one of the four activities since the beginning of the school year. In contrast, only 21 percent of children living in two-parent families have mothers with such low participation in their schools.

Figure 1.—Level of fathers' and mothers' involvement* in school, by family type: Students in grades K-12, 1996



*Low involvement is participation in none or only one activity; moderate involvement is participation in two activities, and high involvement is participation in three or four activities.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey.

[1] The analyses are restricted to children living with biological, step, or adoptive fathers. Children living with foster fathers are excluded.

[2] Not all schools offer parents the opportunity to be involved in each of these activities. Low involvement can result because parents do not take advantage of available opportunities for involvement or because schools do not offer them opportunities for involvement.

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Fathers and mothers who head single-parent families are virtually identical in their level of involvement in their children's schools. Their level of involvement, in fact, is quite similar to mothers in two-parent families.

Children living with single fathers or with single mothers are about equally likely to have parents who are highly involved in their schools, 46 percent and 49 percent, respectively. Both fathers and mothers who head single-parent families have levels of involvement in their children's schools that are quite similar to mothers in two-parent families and are much higher than fathers in two-parent families.

Fathers in two-parent families are more likely to attend school or class events or general school meetings than they are to attend parent-teacher conferences or to volunteer at their children's schools.

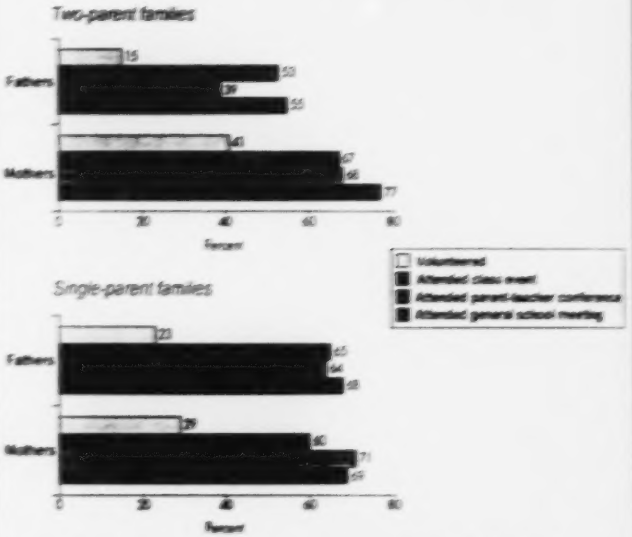
In two-parent families, there are two activities for which fathers' involvement approaches that of mothers: attendance at school or class events (such as a play, science fair, or sports event) and attendance at general school meetings (figure 2). Fathers may find it easier to attend these types of activities because they are more likely than the other two to occur during non-school and non-work hours. Fathers in father-only families are more likely than fathers in two-parent families to participate in these and other activities, so work constraints are not the sole explanation for low involvement among fathers in two-parent families.

Discussion

The observed patterns of fathers' involvement in their children's schools by family structure are consistent with existing research (Cooksey and Fondell, 1996) and with the notion that there is a division of labor in two-parent families, with mothers taking more responsibility for child-related tasks, whereas in single-parent families the lone parent assumes the responsibility. Fathers and mothers in two-parent families may be operating under the mistaken assumption that fathers do not matter as much as mothers when it comes to involvement in their children's school. The results also support research which finds that single fathers and mothers are more similar in their parenting behavior than are mothers and fathers in two-parent families (Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin, 1992).

The low participation of fathers in two-parent families offers schools an opportunity to increase overall parental involvement. By targeting fathers, schools may be able to make greater gains in parental involvement than by targeting mothers or parents, in general. This is not to say that schools should not continue to welcome mothers' involvement. But, because mothers already exhibit relatively high levels of participation in their children's schools, there is less room to increase their involvement. Moreover, increasing fathers' involvement is likely to help children do better in school (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Figure 2.—**Percent of children whose fathers and mothers participated in each school activity, by family type: Students in grades K-12, 1996**



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey.

References and Related Publications

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Cooksey, E.C. and Fondell, M.M. (1996). Spending Time with His Kids: Effects of Family Structure on Fathers' and Children's Lives. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58(3): 693-707.

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences discussed are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For additional details on NHES:96 data collection methods and definitions, see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). *National Household Education Survey of 1996: Data File User's Manual*, Vol. 1, NCES 97-425. By Mary A. Collins et al., Washington, DC.

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Christine Winquist Nord of Westat. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the National Household Education Survey, contact Jerry West (202) 219-1574. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616. NCES publications are available on the Internet at http://NCES.ed.gov.